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The Aam Aadmi Party – Game-changer for Indian politics?

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A newcomer to Indian politics, the Aam Aadmi (Common Man) Party (AAP), has brought a new twist to Indian national politics in the run up to the mid-April Lok Sabha (national legislative) elections. The AAP's stunning victory in the state of New Delhi in December 2013, displacing the Congress party after 15 consecutive years of rule there – followed by an equally stunning dissolution of the government after just 49 days in power – has gripped Indians. Not only is the party confident of re-winning New Delhi (with a majority) in new state elections, it has also become ambitious for the upcoming national elections. According to a Times of India survey, the AAP is now predicted to win anywhere from 26-50 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats, a total which – in the fragmented nature of Indian coalition politics – could result in this new party emerging as India's third-largest political group in the national parliament. In other words, might the AAP become a game-changer for Indian politics?

Launched in November 2012, the AAP is a spinoff of the popular 2011 street protests India Against Corruption (IAC) movement led by Anna Hazare which demanded a Jan Lokpal (public ombudsman) bill. The new entrant has found support amongst scores of Indians frustrated by multi-billion euro government corruption scandals and high living costs. The AAP has also emerged amidst growing public disillusionment with the traditional heavyweight parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress, led respectively by Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi.

The AAP victory in Delhi, despite a poorly-funded campaign, has shaken the longstanding notion in Indian politics that caste, money, and muscle determine electoral

results. Many of its candidates – some of whom defeated Congress and BJP heavyweights – were first-time politicians. The party's biggest achievement though has been to challenge the widespread resignation amongst ordinary citizens, giving them a sense of empowerment to confront bulky bureaucratic systems and corruption in politics. AAP ministers in Delhi shunned luxurious government bungalows, high security and 'red beacon' convoys. Plus they held public consultations on major political decisions, in an effort to usher in a new age of transparency, accountability, and austerity in Indian politics. In mid-February, the AAP leader, Arvind Kejriwal, resigned as Delhi Chief Minister (followed by his cabinet) as a matter of principle, for failure to pass through the public ombudsman bill in Delhi because of Congress-BJP opposition.

In its brief stint in power in Delhi, the party has shown the Indian public that it is serious about tackling the concerns of the ordinary citizen – water, electricity, food, shelter. Within just three days in government, the AAP delivered on its promise of 20,000 litres of free water per month per household, halved electricity tariffs for low levels of electricity consumption while starting an audit of private electricity companies (promised by the previous government), and constructed 48 night shelters for homeless people. In addition, the AAP's hands-on ministers have carried out inspections at 10 government hospitals, and even allegedly exposed a sex and drugs ring.

The AAP has now fielded more than 350 candidates in 20 of India's 29 states to Lok Sabha elections, where the party might even emerge as king-maker. But the party is also eager to replicate its regional success in Delhi in other future state elections. The importance of regional governments is growing in India, which is in a process of decentralisation, transferring greater power from the centre to federal states. This may become increasingly important for India's external partners like the European Union.

In particular, the AAP's rise suggests that external partners should start engaging with state governments as well as the national government. For example, the AAP government in Delhi (followed by the government of the Rajasthan state) has scrapped foreign direct investment (FDI) in retail, meaning foreign retail multinationals cannot set up shop in Delhi. In September 2012 the national government passed a law allowing foreign multinationals to invest in the Indian retail market (i.e. supermarkets) under restricted conditions: for instance, they should work with local companies and hold a stake no greater than 51 per cent in such joint ventures. However, final approval for such FDI projects remains at the discretion of state governments, with some allowing multinational investment and others not. Opening retail to foreign investment is a key objective of the envisaged EU-India Free Trade Agreement, which would enable firms like Tesco or Carrefour to enter the Indian market.

However, despite the current hype and excitement, the AAP now faces at least four significant obstacles. First, the party lacks experienced policy-makers and a well-planned governance agenda, including an economic model which can deliver growth. Second, it must avoid any forms of corruption itself. Third, the party needs to transfer its current momentum into lasting transparency initiatives. Fourth, the party needs a smart communication strategy given the limited timeframe for Lok Sabha polls.

The AAP has emerged out of nowhere to become a potential political game-changer, since it reflects a growing desire for a new form of Indian politics that moves beyond focusing on identity cleavages towards socio-economic issues. Having already shaken the national political debate, the AAP is the party to watch in India's national elections this April.